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## Sky and Stardust: The Flying Saucer in American Popular Culture, 1947–1957

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### Introduction

This essay investigates the relationship between the flying saucer within post-war American popular culture and narratives of home, technology, and authority. As an object embodying a specific cultural moment, the flying saucer became a nodal point, a discursive centre, where discussion of aesthetics, power and modernity came together, projected into the minds of Americans via print media, advertisements, songs and material culture. As an alternative focal point of post-war culture to the atomic bomb, blue suede shoes or Marilyn Monroe, the flying saucer was a bright light cast against darkening skies, revealing an American audience looking optimistically towards a utopian future and guardedly back at the massive destruction of twentieth-century global conflict. As a 'monster,' this symbol of modernity possessed a certain plasticity of identity, evoking variously and non-linearly feelings of fear and fascination, even playfulness. As an historical object, assessed in relation to technological and social change, the flying saucer eventually became thoroughly domesticated and acclimated within American society. Between Kenneth Arnold's sighting which sparked national interest in the phenomenon on 24 June 1947 and the launch of Sputnik I on 4 October 1957, over 5,000 flying saucer observations were reported to the United States Air Force (USAF). In 1950, five or six sightings per day were logged,<sup>1</sup> before spiking in 1952, when more flying saucers were spotted 'than at any time since the initial flood' in 1947, totalling 1,700.<sup>2</sup> Reports became more sporadic in 1953 when only 429 sightings were received, subsequently declining further to



Notes

1. Drew  
Petersbu

2. AP, 'F

st,' St.

52, p. 1.

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12. Ibid.
13. See [redacted] *Unnatural and* [redacted] *on: Playing* [redacted] *with Fra* [redacted]
14. See [redacted] *at I Don't* [redacted] *American* [redacted] *Culture,* [redacted]
15. See [redacted] *nd a Place in* [redacted] *ture* [redacted]
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17. AP, ' [redacted] 5 June [redacted] 1947. Th [redacted] ce, 26 June [redacted] 1947, p. 1.



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25. Cohen, 'Preface: In a Time of Monsters,' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, p. viii.
26. *Ibid.*, p. x.
27. From *Postisms*, Jacques *ns, Newisms, as Royle,*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Further *was* misquot *e shaped* like s *ed that, 'He* also d *ng in the* sun.' ... *icago* Tribune *niny and* seemed *because* they we *ch 1999) -* (<http://u> *accessed*



30. <http://www.project1947.com/fig/kamurrow.htm> ('Transcript of Ed Murrow-Kenneth Arnold Telephone Conversation,' 7 April 1950) – accessed 29 April 2015.
31. Quoted in Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'What is Visual Culture?' in *The Visual Culture Reader* (London, 2002. 2nd ed.), p. 5.
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37. Donald H. Menzel, 'The Truth About Flying Saucers,' *Look*, 17 June 1952, pp. 35–39.
38. David L. Martin, *Curious Visions of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), Front Flap.
39. Hollings, *Welcome to Mars*, p. xiii.
40. Hollings
41. <http://www.project1947.com/fig/kamurrow.htm> See the Flying Disc
42. Hollings
43. These the promise of the future. For example, the television set came from the (http://www.project1947.com/fig/kamurrow.htm) Up From The Potato Field Technology in a space-
44. Walcott Donald H. Menzel,



45. Martin, *Curious Visions of Modernity*, p. xiii.

46. A Gallup Poll from 1996 revealed that forty-five per cent of those surveyed believed aliens had visited the earth. In 2010, a CBS News poll found thirty per cent believed the same thing. Further, thirty-three per cent believed in ghosts, thirty-seven per cent in haunted houses and twenty-one per cent in witches. Peter Dendle states that 'folklorists and other cultural interpreters of the future will have every right, retrospectively, to say that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries many people still quaintly believed in "monsters", such as Bigfoot, lake monsters, aliens, and ghosts.' (From Peter J. Dendle, 'Conclusion: Monsters and the Twenty-First Century: The Preternatural in an Age of Scientific Consensus,' in Asa Simon Mittman (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Farnham, 2012), pp. 442-3).

47. Susan Lepselter, 'The Flight of the Ordinary: Narrative, Poetics, Power and UFOs in the American Uncanny,' PhD Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005, p. x.

48. That the flying saucer was discussed in places such as *Life* should indicate how widely the phenomenon permeated. As a sign of *Life's* popularity, for example, in 'just thirteen weeks in the early 1950s, over one half of Americans had seen a particular issue.'

49. 'Farm

50. 'Flyin

51. Davi

52. Relm

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53. A

Tribune,

54. Relm

1952, p.

55. 'Q's

56. Robe



mouth Times

ota Herald-

7 August

52, p. 45.

57. There was also perhaps an eagerness to construct what Arnold saw as something it was not, to mould it into a particular and more familiar science-fictional shape. Time's 'The Somethings' article, as if to make the link even more explicit, began with a passage of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898), describing something rushing 'up into the sky and out of the grayness ... very swiftly into the luminous clearness above the clouds ...; something flat and broad, and very large, that swept round in a vast curve' ('The Somethings,' *Time*, 14 July 1947).

58. <http://www.frankwu.com/Paul-8.html> ('Gallery of Frank R. Paul's Science Fiction Artwork') - accessed 29 April 2015.

59. John Block Friedman, 'Foreword,' in Mittman (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, p. xxvi.

60. Mittman, 'Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies,' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, pp. 7-8.

61. Hollings, *Welcome to Mars*, p. 14.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

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65. *Ibid.*

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69. 'Stater hotels' (advertisement), *Life*, 5 January 1955, p. 50.

70. Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth Of Things In The Sky* (New York, 1997), Back Cover.

71. <http://www.abomb1.org/hiroshim/laurenc1.html> (William L. Lawrence, 'Eye Witness Account: Atomic Bomb Mission Over Nagasaki,' 9 August 1945) – accessed 29 April 2015.

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77. Jerome Clark, *The UFO Book: Encyclopedia of the Extra-terrestrial* (Detroit, 1998), p. 653. *Italics in quoted passage added by the author for clarity and emphasis.*

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Su...*

83. *Cu...* New York, 1994), p...

84. 'Was...

85. *Denc...* natural in an  
*Age of S...* anion to  
*Monster...*





86. Ibid.

87. See, for example, Robert Martin's 'Livernois Avenue Fights Back' in *Life*, 22 March 1954, p. 104, which reported on a car sales-man who accepted a flying-saucer model as trade-in and used it for advertising outside his dealership. On the phone the dealer Clyde Headrick had smoothly asked 'What model flying saucer?' and for the customer to 'bring it around for appraisal.' This story was worked into a Chevrolet advertisement, displayed in *Life*, 17 October 1955, p. 22, which ran the line '\$400 trade-in allowance on a flying saucer.'

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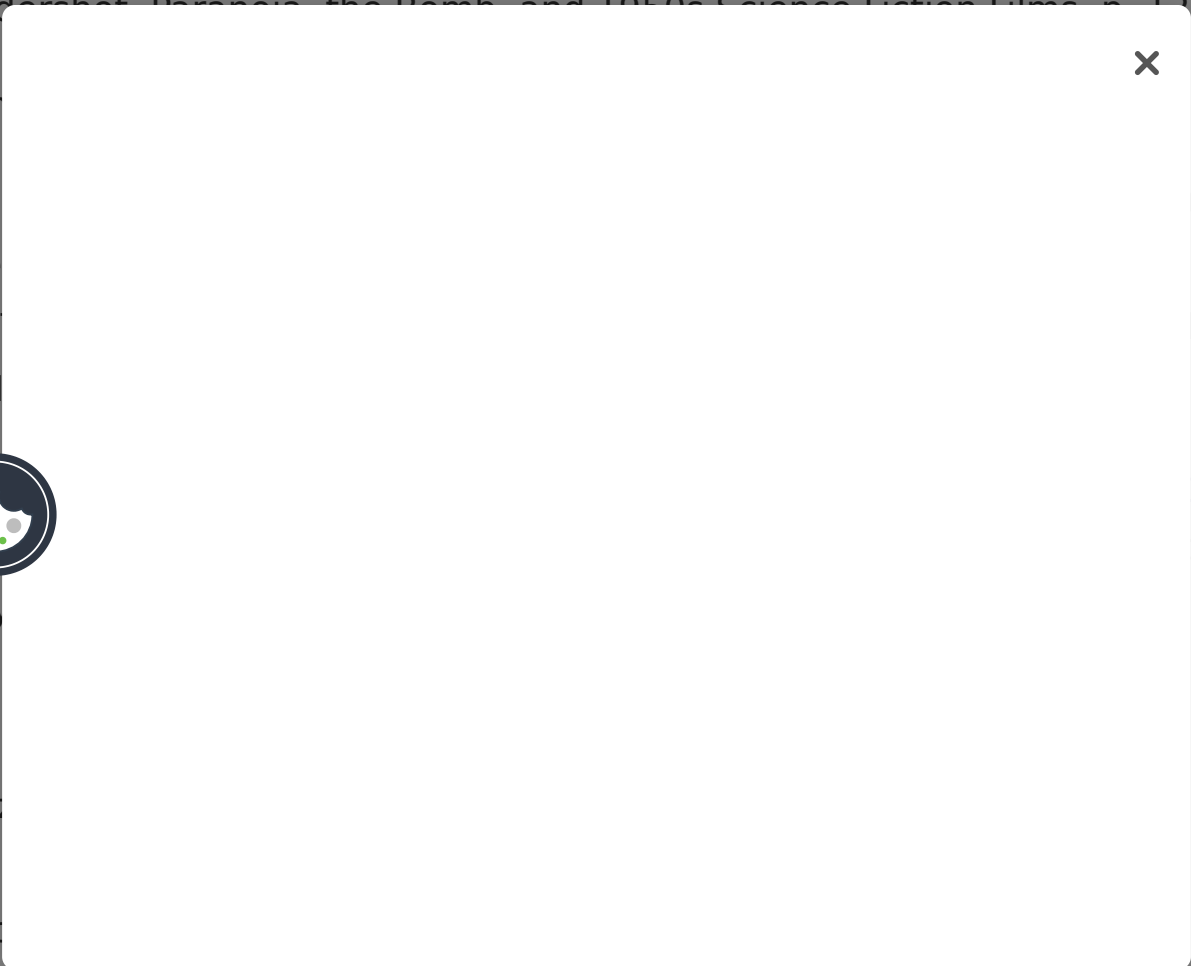
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94. Vern... reseret News  
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96. Ibid.

97. Men... Donald  
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[temperature change] or 'meteors coupled with the normal excitement of witnesses' (Clark, The UFO Book, p. 661).

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112. J.W

113. Var... ical Review, 106(5) (

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